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ABSTRACT

The development of the communicative competence test for college business majors described in this paper consisted of three phases. The first phase identified as desirable the following communication behaviors: planning, logic, perception, communication without fear or anxiety, listening, oral communication, conference leadership, and nonverbal communication. Phase two focused on the selection of appropriate test items for the selected competencies; for economic reasons and to avoid the lack of interjudge reliability, cognitive items were chosen over behavioral measures. The third phase, now in progress, involves testing the items through item analysis and factor analytic techniques. To date, 92 multiple choice items have been administered to students in 33 introductory college course sections. The items will undergo repeated revisions until the test represents a satisfactory measure of communicative competence. (MAI)

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PUTTING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES TO TEST: A CASE IN POINT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA[1]

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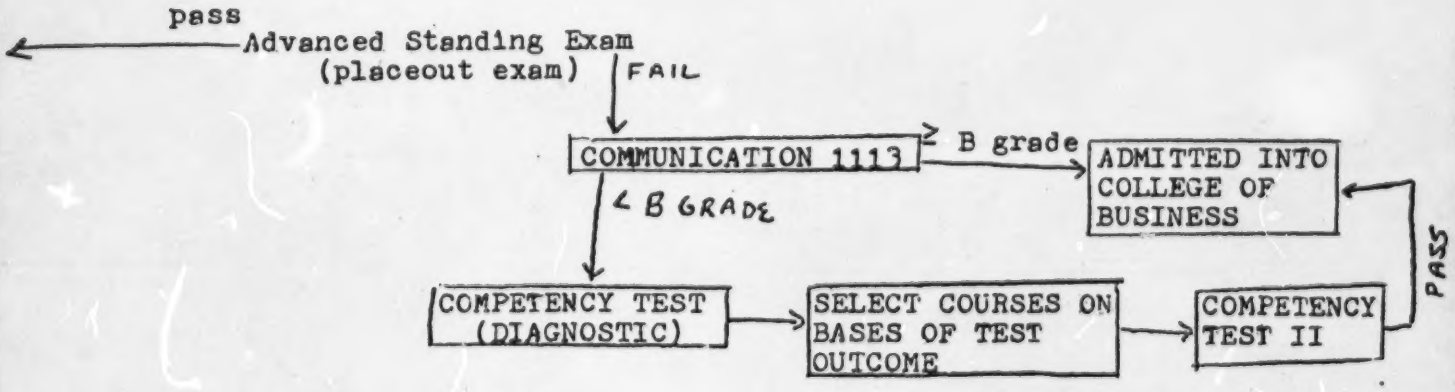
[1] Paper presented at the Central States Speech Convention, Chicago, Illinois, April 1978.

In keeping with the NAEP/SCA Feasibility Project initiated in June 1976, the University of Oklahoma Communication Department attempted to develop a communication competency test to administer to the University's Business College majors. The purpose of development of the competency test was to assess business students' communication competencies.

The development of this test can be divided into three phases. The first phase dealt with identification of communication competencies these students should possess. The second phase focused on the selection of appropriate test items for the competencies selected. The third phase involved testing the items using item analysis and factor analytic techniques.

First it seems appropriate to explain how this competency test will be used. The following model will best illustrate how the test will be used:

MODEL FOR BUSINESS MAJORS



A business major who receives a B grade or better in the introductory communication course qualifies for admission into the College of Business. If the student receives lower than a B grade, he or she takes the competency test. Based upon results obtained from the diagnostic test, the student is directed to take the appropriate course for these deficiencies. Upon completion of the course the student takes a parallel form of the competency test. If the student passes the test, he or she is then eligible for admission into the College of Business. This model was proposed by the School of Business to insure that their students are competent communicators.

IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

The first step in the project was to identify the communication competencies desired. The School of Business specified various communication behaviors they felt to be important for their majors. They selected the following communication behaviors: Planning; logic; perception; communicate without fear or anxiety; listening; oral communication with individuals, small groups, before an audience; conference leadership and nonverbal communication. The final list was not as easily created as was the list of the Business College because the objective was to include a broad range of communication skills rather than curriculum divisions. The difficulties encountered resemble the ones

encountered by the NAEP/SCA Feasibility Project where lack of specification of competencies stems from lack of consistency in speech curricula across the country and orientation toward skills rather than cognitive knowledge.[2]

For answers to these questions, we consulted previous efforts of R. R. Allen and K. L. Brown[3] and Barbara S. Wood[4]. Based on information compiled from these sources and keeping the Business School's concerns in mind we created the following grid:

FIGURE 1

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION	PUBLIC SPEAKING	INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION (INFORMAL)	INTERVIEWING	SMALL GROUP AND CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP
Formal Speaking Skills delivery audience analysis nonverbal				
Developing Arguments reasoning evidence logic				
Analyzing Messages planning organizing language				
Spontaneous Communication Skills perception listening nonverbal				
Managing Communication negotiation interaction analysis				
Communication Apprehension				

As is apparent, the categories are not mutually exclusive but represent various communication contexts and both verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication are implied in each category. Also, the competencies are for both controlling and being controlled. Then, not only are we concerned with overt behaviors but also the knowledge of principles underlying behavior. Thus, "analyzing messages" is just as important a competency as the overt act of delivering a speech proposal.

The horizontal axis of the grid includes the usual communication contexts found in most textbooks and course syllabi. These also coincide with courses in our department.

SELECTION OF TEST ITEMS

Once communication competencies were specified, the second problem was the selection of appropriate test items. The major issue concerned was whether to measure competencies behaviorally or cognitively. Behavioral measures of speaking usually consist of a panel of judges rendering decisions of speech performances on some pre-determined criteria. There are several problems associated with this method of evaluation. First of all, inter-judge reliability has been reported as being low. For example, Becker found inter-judge discrimination between scales on speaking performance to be incredibly low.[5] Other low reliabilities were reported by T. Clevenger, Jr.[7] If it is our job to determine whether or

not someone is a competent communicator, this does not seem to be a reliable method to employ. Secondly, does the procedure provide a valid measure of speaking performance? The research reported in our literature again casts doubt on this method. Apparently, we are not measuring that which we are supposed to measure using existing public speaking scales. DiSalvo and Bockner found through factor analytic techniques that people usually rate speeches along only one or two dimensions while ignoring the rest.[7] We assume that several criteria are important in speeches, and so we teach several concepts and principles. We teach students in oral communication several competencies but scales used to evaluate speaking focus on only two. How adequately are we measuring what we expect to be learned and possessed as part of their behavioral repetroire?

The third problem associated with using behavioral measures of communication competencies is that of cost in time and money. If one were to test eight hundred students each year it would require two full time staff members to spend each semester doing nothing else but evaluating business students' speeches. They would have to engage in this activity every day from start to finish of every semester in order to review all the students who wished to apply to the Business College for admission. When real dollar figures were presented to the Business College concerning this matter,

they were convinced that perhaps, another measurement procedure was needed. Performance evaluation may be questionable in terms of reliability and validity and it poses a severe economic problem.

We have decided to measure cognitive knowledge; to use an indirect measure of competence. It has been argued that if a person possewses cognitive knowledge of appropriate communication behaviors, that person will probably know how to appropriately apply these behaviors to the proper situations. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, which surveys students from all parts of the country, favored indirect measurement strategies.[8] The NAEP/SCA Feasibility Project explored both behavioral and cognitive measures which resulted in development of cognitive measures of speaking skills but laid plans for behavioral measures.[9] Results of the initial project (NAEP/SCA) efforts indicated some success in dealing with development of cognitive measures of speaking skills. As far as the economic feasibility of cognitive measures, they are much easier to administer, can be used in large numbers simultaneously and cost very little. A concern however, was expressed for the necessity of creating items common and relevant to all students. Items could not be textbook specific nor college or university specific. They must be appropriate across our discipline.

TESTING THE COMPETENCY TEST

The first draft of the cognitive test consisted of ninety-two multiple-choice items with four alternatives each. The test was administered to thirty sections of our introductory communication course and to three other universities' introductory course sections. The data will be analyzed for item difficulty and item discrimination. We plan to revise the test according to the results received from the analyses and re-administer it to the student population. Further revisions will follow this cycle until we have satisfactorily fulfilled our objective in creating a communication competency test. We do not claim to create the test for which everyone has been looking, nor do we suggest that we will have created a National Assessment test since this test is geared toward a specific population and age group. However, we hope to create a test useful for the Business School's goals and perhaps a paving of the road, so to speak, from which other work can evolve. Admittedly, it is an ambitious goal and a difficult task to measure communication competencies, but that necessary procedure is long overdue. The "Back to Basics" movement in elementary and secondary schools is a clear indication that we must be concerned with "real" competence. Our best response to "Back to Basics" will be a clear illustration that communication is the most fundamental "Basic" of all. In comparison, reading, writing, and 'rithmetic are

secondary functions or competencies acquired in relation to the more common oral communication competencies. We found the five functions of the Instructional Development Division to be most promising, and we are building on them.

ENDNOTES

[1]Marla Gail Scafe, paper presented at the Central States Speech Convention, Chicago, Illinois, April 1978.

[2]For a more thorough discussion of these problems see: N. Mead, "Issues Related to a National Assessment of Speech and Listening Skills," paper presented at SCA, Washington, D. C., December 1977.

[3]R. R. Allen and K. L. Brown (eds.), Developing Communication Competence in Children. Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook. 1976.

[4]Barbara S. Wood (ed.), Developing Communication Communication Competencies in Children: Pre-K Through Grade Six, 1976 and Grades Seven Through Twelve, 1977, Urbana, Illinois: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

[5]Becker, "The Rating of Speeches: Scale Independence," Speech Monographs, March 1962, 38-44.

[6]T. Clevenger, Jr., "Influence of Scale Complexity on the Reliability of Ratings of General Effectiveness on Public Speaking," Speech Monographs, June 1964, 153-156. Other sources to consult include a literature review by K. Brocks, "Some Basic Considerations in Rating Scale Development," Central States Sppech Journal, February 1957, 27-31.

[7]DiSalvo and Bochner, "The Use of Simulated Speech Profiles and the PROF Technique in Capturing the Policies of Speech Raters," Speech Teacher, November 1972, 272-280.

[8]N. Mead, "Issues Related to a National Assessment of Speech and Listening Skills," paper presented at SCA, Washington, D. C., December 1977.

[9]Ibid.